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**Indian Religion**

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## INDIAN RELIGION



FOR the purpose of a brief description of the religion of the American Indians we may define religion as that group of concepts and acts which spring from the relation of the individual to the outer world, so far as these relations are not considered as due to physical forces the action of which is accounted for by purely rationalistic considerations. The scope of religious concepts will depend to a certain extent, therefore, on the knowledge of the laws of nature; and, since the border-line of the natural and the supernatural, as conceived in the mind of primitive man, does not coincide with our view of this subject, there will be marked differences between the scope of religion among civilized nations and that among less advanced peoples. For instance, the causal relations determining the movements of the stars are recognized by civilized man; but at an earlier time it was believed that the positions of the stars influenced in a mysterious manner the fates of man and that their movements could be controlled by his will. Among tribes which held to the latter opinion, views relating to the heavenly bodies would form part of the religion of the people while among those peoples to which the causal relations determining the motions of the stars are known, these motions are no longer subject to religious interpretations.

Owing to the different point of view, it may also happen that certain ideas of primitive man, which from our standpoint would have to be considered as religious in character, are interpreted by the people holding them as purely rationalistic. In our judgment, for instance, sympathetic cures, which are believed in by most primitive tribes and even by uneducated people among ourselves, can not be considered as due to any physical effect, while among primitive tribes they may be so viewed. The same is true of certain mythological concepts. If an Indian tribe explains the markings on the skin of the chipmunk as due to the fact that at an early time the grizzly bear scratched its back, this may be to the mind of the Indian a perfectly rationalistic explanation, while to us it would be entirely mysterious. Thus it appears that the general views of nature—the explanations given for the occurrence of natural phenomena—necessarily enter into a consideration of the religions of primitive tribes, even if these explanations should be based on a purely rationalistic attitude on the part of primitive man. The less clear the line between observation and reasoning on the one hand and imagination and inference due to emotional states on the other, the less sharply drawn will be the line between what may be called science and religion. In accordance with the definition given before, those concepts that spring from the relation of the individual to the outer world, and the form of which depends on imagination and emotion may be said to form the tenets of religion.

When religious acts are considered in greater detail, it appears that here also acts prompted by rationalistic considerations are not sharply separated from others dictated by imagination and emotion. Thus, when a medicine-man pursues and captures the

fleeing soul of a sick man, he may follow out by his acts in a rational way opinions based largely on reasoning, although deeply affected in their origin by such emotions as fear and love. When, on the other hand, he tries to gain greater efficiency by putting himself into a state of emotional excitement, in which he believes his chances of success are enhanced, his acts become religious, in the stricter sense of the term. This lack of sharp division between rationalistic and religious forms of activity is found everywhere. Furthermore, it must be borne in mind that many actions are performed without any conscious reason, except so far as they are required by custom. This is true particularly of actions that are considered as proper, like those determined by rules regulating the behavior of the young to the old, or of the common people to the nobility; or also of actions that are considered as ethical, like those of hospitality and of pity. Here the line of demarcation between religious activities and others not connected with religion becomes even less sharp, because it often happens that actions originally performed without any particular reason or for purely rationalistic purposes are secondarily given religious motives. It thus follows that religious views and actions are not primarily connected with ethical concepts. Only in so far as man in his religious relations to the outer world endeavors to follow certain rules of conduct, in order to avoid evil effects, is a relation between primitive religion and ethics established.

The religious concepts of the Indians may be described in two groups—those that concern the individual, and those that concern the social group, such as the tribe and clan. The fundamental concept bearing on the religious life of the individual is the belief in the existence of magic power, which may influence the life of man, and which in turn may be influenced by human activity. In this sense magic power must be understood as the wonderful qualities which are believed to exist in objects, animals, men, spirits, or deities, and which are superior to the natural qualities of man. This idea of magic power is one of the fundamental concepts that occur among all Indian tribes. It is what is called MANITO by the Algonquian tribes; WAKANDA, by the Siouan tribes; ORENDIA, by the Iroquois; SULIA, by the Salish; NAUALAK, by the Kwakwaka'wakw, and TAMANOAS, by the Chinook. Notwithstanding slight differences in the signification of these terms the fundamental notion of all of them is that of a power inherent in the objects of nature which is more potent than the natural powers of man. This idea seems adequately expressed by our term "wonderful;" and it is hardly necessary to introduce an Indian term, as often been attempted. Among the American terms, the word MANITO, has been most frequently used to express this idea. The degree to which the magic power of nature is individualized differs considerably among various tribes. Although the belief in the powers of inanimate objects is common, we find in America that, on the whole, animals, particularly the larger ones, are most frequently considered as possessed of such magic power. Strong anthropomorphic individualization also occurs, which justifies us in calling these powers deities. It seems probable that among the majority of tribes, besides the belief

in the power of specific objects, a belief in a magic power that is only vaguely localized exists. In cases where this belief is pronounced, the notion sometimes approaches the concept of a deity, or of a great spirit which is hardly anthropomorphic in its character. This is the case, for instance, among the Tsimshian of British Columbia and among the Algonquian tribes of the Great Lakes, and also in the figure of the Tirawa of the Pawnee.

As stated before, the whole concept of the world—or, in other words, the mythology of each tribe—enters to a very great extent into their religious concepts and activities. The mythologies are highly specialized in different parts of North America; and, although a large number of myths are the common property of many American tribes, the general view of the world appears to be quite distinct in various parts of the continent. Taking into consideration the continent of America as a whole, we find a type of explanation of the world which is psychologically quite different from the familiar Semitic type. In the Semitic religion eternal existence appeared as an unintelligible problem, and the mind preferred to assume a beginning which was accounted for by transferring the existing world, as it was known by observation, into the thought of a creator, and interpreting the creation as a projection of his thoughts by his will-power into objective existence. The Indian mind, on the other hand, accepts the eternal existence of the world and accounts for its specific form by the assumption that events which once happened in early times settled for once and all the form in which the same kind of event must continue to occur. For instance, when the bear produced the stripes on the chipmunk by scratching its back, this determined that all chipmunks were to have such stripes; or when an ancestor of a clan was taught a certain ceremony, that same ceremony must be performed by all future generations. This idea is not by any means confined to America, but is found among primitive peoples of other continents as well, and occurs even in Semitic cults.

Considering American mythologies in their broadest outlines the following areas may be distinguished: (1) The Eskimo area, the mythology of which is characterized by an abundance of purely human hero tales, and a very small number of traditions accounting for the origin of small animals, and these generally largely in human setting. (2) The North Pacific Coast area, characterized by a large cycle of transformer myths, in which the origin of many of the arts of man is accounted for, as well as the peculiarities of many animals; the whole forming a very disconnected heterogeneous mass of traditions. (3) Allied to these appear the traditions of the Western plateau and the Mackenzie basin area, a region in which animal tales abound, many accounting for the present conditions of the world, the whole being very disconnected and contradictory. (4) The Californian area, the mythologies of which are characterized by a stronger emphasis laid on creation by will power than is found in most other parts of the American continent. (5) The principal characteristic of the mythologies of the area of the Great Plains, the eastern woodlands, and the arid Southwest, is the tendency to systematization of the myths under the influence of a highly



developed ritual. This tendency is more sharply defined in the South than in the North and Northeast, and has perhaps progressed further than anywhere else among the Pueblos, to whom the origin of the clan and societies seem to give the keynote of mythological concepts; and among the Pawnee, whose contemplation of the stars seems to have given the principal tone to mythology. The religious concepts of the Indians deal largely with the relation of the individual to the magic power mentioned above, and are specialized in accordance with their general mythological concepts, which determine largely the degree to which the powers are personified as animals, spirits, or deities.

Another group of religious concepts, which are not less important than the group heretofore discussed, refers to the relations of the individual to his internal states, so far as these are not controlled by his will, and are therefore considered as subject to external magic influences. Most important among these are dreams, sickness, and death. These may be produced by obsession, or by external forces which compel the soul to leave the body. In this sense the soul is considered by almost all tribes as not subject to the individual will; it may be abstracted from the body by hostile forces, and it may be damaged and killed. The concept of the soul itself shows a great variety of forms. Very often the soul is identified with life, but we also find commonly the belief in a multiplicity of souls. Thus, among the Eskimo, the name is considered as one of the souls of man, another soul belongs to the body, the third is independent of the body. The soul is also identified with the blood, the bones, the shadow, the nape of the neck. Based on these ideas is also the belief in the existence of the soul after death. Thus, in the belief of the Algonquian Indians of the Great Lakes, the souls of the deceased are believed to reside in the far west with the brother of the great culture-hero. Among the Kutenai the belief prevails that the souls will return at a later period accompanying the culture-hero. Sometimes the land from which the ancestors of the tribe have sprung, which in the South is often conceived of as underground, is of equal importance.

Since the belief in the existence of magic powers is very strong in the Indian mind, all his actions are regulated by the desire to retain the good will of those friendly to him, and to control those that are hostile.

The first means of retaining the good will of the friendly power is the strict observance of a great variety of proscriptions. An important group of these may be combined under the term "taboo". Among these, furthermore, food taboos are particularly common. Every tribe of America, no matter how scanty their means of subsistence may have been, had certain kinds of tabooed food—that is, food forbidden, either permanently or at certain seasons, or on certain occasions. Thus, one division of the Omaha were forbidden to eat the shoulder of the buffalo, while another one was forbidden to eat the elk; the Iroquois were forbidden to eat the animal from which their family name was taken, and the same is true of Pueblo and other clans; the Eskimo must not eat caribou and walrus at the same season; the

Navajo must not touch flesh of the bear, nor the Zuni anything that lives in the water.

Not less numerous are the taboos of work. These are perhaps nowhere so highly developed as among the Eskimo, among whom work on carbou skins, seal skins, metals, ice, and heather is forbidden under certain conditions. Here belong, also the taboos of story-telling, and of playing certain games at certain seasons, which are quite common. Of great importance are the taboos intended to prevent evil effects of impurity. Thus we find a large number of taboos forbidding menstruating women, murderers, and mourners from performing certain kinds of work. They must not touch fresh food lest the magic powers controlling the food supply may be offended.

Social taboos, which are very common in Polynesia, are not so markedly developed in America, although the strict secrecy with which certain sacred actions are performed by privileged members of a tribe is akin to this institution. Thus it is forbidden, except on certain occasions for any member of the tribe to touch or even see the contents of sacred bundles, and even then only the keeper of the bundle is allowed to open it to view. While all these taboos are essentially negative in their character, forbidding certain actions in order to avoid giving offense, there are positive acts which are required for the same purpose. Some of these might well be called rules of ethical conduct, although the one reason given for them is the endeavor to retain the good will of the wonderful powers of nature. All the numerous regulations which are found all over the continent, and intended to retain the good will of the food animals, and which are essentially signs of respect shown to them, belong to this class. Dogs must not gnaw the bones of food animals because this is a sign of disrespect. The bear, after having been killed, receives marks of reverence; and the game animal obtained at the beginning of the hunting season must be treated with particular care. The complicated custom relating to buffalo hunting, and the salmon ceremonies of the Northwest Indians, as well as the whale ceremonies of the Eskimo, may also be given as examples. Respectful behavior toward old people and generally decent conduct are also often counted among such required acts. Here may also be included the numerous customs of purification that are required in order to avoid the ill will of the powers. These, however, may better be considered as constituting one of the means of controlling magic powers which form a very large part of the religious observances of the American Indians.

The Indian is not satisfied with the attempt to avoid the ill-will of the powers, but he tries also to make them subservient to his own needs. This end may be attained in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most characteristic of North American Indian methods of gaining control over supernatural powers is that of the acquisition of one of them as a personal protector. Generally this process is called the acquiring of a manito; and the most common method of acquiring it is for the young man during the period of adolescence to purify himself by fasting, bathing, and vomiting, until his body is perfectly clean and acceptable to the supernatural beings. At the same time the youth works himself

by these means, by dancing, and sometimes also by means of drugs into a trance, in which he has a vision of the guardian spirit which is to protect him throughout life. These means of establishing communication with the spirit world are in very general use, also at other periods of life. The magic power that man thus acquires may give him special abilities; it may make him a successful hunter, warrior, or shaman, or it may give him power to acquire wealth, success in gambling, or the love of women.

While the above is the most common method of acquiring magic power, other means are well known among the American Indian, particularly among those tribes in which strong clan organization prevail. They believe that wonderful power may be attained by inheritance. There are also numerous cases, as among the Arapahoe and Blackfeet (Siksika), where the privilege of acquiring it and the control over it may be purchased. Among the American Eskimo the idea prevails that it may be transmitted by teaching and by bodily contact with a person who controls such powers. Ordinarily its possession is considered so sacred that it must not be divulged except in cases of extreme danger, but among other tribes it may be made known to the whole tribe. In a few cases the opinion prevails that such powers exist in certain localities, but can not be acquired by individuals.

Another means of controlling the powers of nature is by prayer, which may be directed either to the protecting spirit of the individual or to other powers. Objects of prayer may be protection in danger, removal of sickness, the obtaining of food or other material benefits, or a more general and abstract request for the blessing of the powers. Many prayers are addressed in fixed form or contain at least certain old formulas.

Another way of invoking the protection of the powers is through the use of charms (also called fetishes). The charm either believed to be the seat of magic power, or it may be a symbol of such power, and its action may be based on its symbolic significance. Of the former kind are presumably many objects contained in the sacred bundles of certain Indians which are believed to be possessed of sacred powers; while the symbolic significance seems to prevail in charms like the stone worn by the North Pacific Coast Indians, which are believed to harden the skin against missiles of hostile shamans, or the magic whip of wolf skin of the Eskimo, which is believed to have the power of driving away spirits.

Symbolic actions are also made use of. Such acts are, for instance, the setting-up of prayer-sticks, which are meant to convey man's wishes to the powers. Often these wishes are indicated by special attachments, expressing in symbolic or pictographic manner the thing wished for. Somewhat related to such symbolic actions are also all processes of divination, in which, by a symbolic act, the propitiousness of the proposed undertaking is ascertained.

Still more potent means of influencing the powers are offerings and sacrifices. On the whole, these are not so strongly developed in North America as they are in other parts of the world. In



many regions human sacrifices were common—for instance, in Mexico and Yucatan—while in northern America they are known only in rare instances, as among the Pawnee. However, many cases of torture, particularly of self-torture, must be reckoned here. Other bloody sacrifices are also rare in North America. We may mention the sacrifices of the dog among the Iroquois. Only to a limited extent do we find the tendency of considering the killing of game as a bloody sacrifice. On the other hand, sacrifices of tobacco smoke, of corn, and parts of food, of small manufactured objects, and of symbolic objects are very common. These gifts may be offered to any of the supernatural powers with the intent of gaining their assistance and avoiding their enmity.

Still another way of gaining control over supernatural powers is by incantations, which in a way are related to prayers, but which act rather through the magic influence of the words. Therefore the traditional form of these incantations is rigidly adhered to. They occur frequently among the Arctic tribes of the continent, but are not by any means lacking among others, who believe that the recitation of a short formula may aid in reaching a desired end. In the same way that incantations are related to prayer, certain acts and charms are related to offerings. We find among almost all Indian tribes the custom of performing certain acts, which are neither symbolic nor offerings, nor other attempts to obtain the assistance of superior beings, but which are effective through their own potency. Such acts are the use of lucky objects intended to secure good fortune; or the peculiar treatment of animals, plants, and other objects, in order to bring about a change of weather.

There is also found among most Indian tribes the idea that the supernatural powers, if offended by transgressions of rules of conduct, may be propitiated by punishment. Such punishment may consist in the removal of the offending individual, who may be killed by the members of the tribe, or the propitiation may be accomplished by milder forms of punishment. Of particular interest among these is confession as a means of propitiation, which is found among the Athapascans, the Iroquois, and the Eskimo. Other forms of punishment are based largely on the idea of purification by fasting, bathing, and vomiting. Among the Plains Indians the vow to perform a ceremony or another act agreeable to the powers is considered an efficient means of gaining their good will or atoning for past offenses.

Protection against disease is also sought by the help of superhuman powers. These practices have two distinct forms according to the fundamental conception of disease. Disease is conceived of principally in two forms—either as due to the presence of a material object in the body of the patient, or as an effect of the absence of the soul from the body. The cure of disease is intrusted to the shamans or medicine-men, who obtain their powers generally by the assistance of guardian spirits, who may personally be endowed with magic powers. It is their duty to discover the material disease which is located in the patient's body, and which they extract by sucking or pulling with the hands; or to go in pursuit of the absent soul, to recover it, and to restore it to the patient. Both these forms of shamanism are found practically all over the continent, but in some

regions for instance, in California—the idea of material bodies that cause sickness is particularly strongly developed; while in other regions the idea of the absence of the soul seems to be more marked. In treating the patient, the shamans almost everywhere use various means to work themselves into a state of excitement which is produced by singing, by the use of the drum and rattle, and by dancing. The belief also widely prevails that unpropitious conditions may counteract the work of the shaman, and that for this reason particular care must be taken to remove all disturbing and impure elements from the place where the shamanistic performance is held. When the shaman has to have intercourse with the spirits, whom he visits in their own domain, or when he has to pursue the soul of the patient, we find frequently sleight-of-hand employed, such as the tying of the hands of the shaman, who, when his soul leaves the body, is believed to free himself with the help of the spirits.

The belief that certain individuals can acquire control over the powers has also led to the opinion that they may be used to harm enemies. The possession of such control is not always beneficial, but may be used also for purposes of witchcraft. Hostile shamans may throw disease into the bodies of their enemies, or they may abduct their souls. They may do harm by sympathetic means, and control the will power of others by the help of the supernatural means at their disposal. Witchcraft is everywhere considered as a crime and it is so punished.

Besides those manifestations of religious belief that relate to the individual, religion has become closely associated with the social structure of the tribes, so that the ritualistic side of religion can be understood only in connection with the social organization of the Indian tribes. Even the fundamental traits of their social organization possess a religious import. This is true particularly of the clans so far as they are characterized by totems. The totem is almost always an object of more or less religious reverence to the clan; and there are many cases in which taboos relating to the totemic animal exist, like those previously referred to among the Omaha. Also in cases where the clans have definite political functions, like those of the Omaha and the Iroquois, those functions are closely associated with religious concepts, partly in so far as their origin is ascribed to myths, partly in so far as the functions are associated with the performance of religious rites. The position of officials is also closely associated with definite religious concepts. Thus, the head of a clan at times is considered as the representative of the mythological ancestor of the clan, and as such is believed to be endowed with superior powers; or the position as officer in the tribe or clan entails the performance of certain definite religious functions. In this sense many of the political functions among Indian tribes are closely associated with what may be termed "priestly functions." The religious significance of social institutions is most clearly marked in cases where the tribe, or large parts of the tribe, join in the performance of certain ceremonies which are intended to serve partly a political, partly a religious end. Such acts are some of the intertribal ball games, the busk of the Creeks, the sun dance of the Plains Indians, performances of the numerous warrior societies of the Plains. Here also belong the secret societies which are highly developed among

the Pueblos, in California, and on the North Pacific coast. It is characteristic of rituals in many parts of the world that they tend to develop into a more or less dramatic representation of the myths from which the ritual is derived. For this reason the use of masks is a common feature of these rituals, in which certain individuals impersonate supernatural beings. In those tribes among which very complex rituals have developed we find the ceremonies frequently in charge of certain officers, who are at the same time the keepers of the sacred objects belonging to the tribe or to the societies; and it would seem that the whole system of religious beliefs and practices has developed the more systematically, the more strictly the religious practices have come to be in charge of a body of priests. This tendency to systematization of religious beliefs may be observed particularly among the Pueblos and the Pawnee, but it also occurs in isolated cases in other parts of the continent; for instance, among the Bellacoola of British Columbia, and those Algonquian tribes that have the Midewiwin ceremonial fully developed. In these cases we find that frequently an elaborate series of esoteric doctrines and practices exists, which are known to only a small portion of the tribe, while the mass of the people are familiar only with part of the ritual and with its esoteric features. For this reason we often find the religious beliefs and practices of the mass of a tribe rather heterogeneous as compared with the beliefs held by the priests. Among many of the tribes in which priests are found, we find distinct esoteric societies, and it is not by any means rare that the doctrines of one society are not in accord with those of another. All this is clearly due to the fact that the religious ideas of the tribe are derived from many different sources, and have been brought into order at a later date by the priests charged with the keeping of the tribal rituals. Esoteric forms of religion in charge of priests are found among the tribes of the arid region in the Southwest, the tribes of the southern Mississippi basin, and to a less extent among the more northerly tribes on the Plains. It would seem that, on the whole, the import of the esoteric teachings decreases among the more northerly and northeasterly tribes of the continent. It is probably least developed among the Eskimo, the tribes of the Mackenzie basin, and the tribes of the great plateau region, in so far as these have remained uninfluenced by the Plains Indians and by those of the Pacific coast.

On the whole, the Indians incline strongly toward all forms of religious excitement. This is demonstrated not only by the exuberant development of ancient religious forms, but also by the frequency with which prophets have appeared among them, who taught new doctrines and new rites, based either on older religious beliefs, or on teaching partly of Christian, partly of Indian origin. Perhaps the best known of these forms of religion is the ghost dance, which swept over a large part of the continent during the last decade of the nineteenth century. But other prophets of similar type and of far-reaching influence were numerous. One of these was Tenskwatawa, the famous brother of Tecumseh; another, the seer Smohalla of the Pacific coast; and even among the Eskimo such prophets have been known, particularly in Greenland.

